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SUBJECT: MARMARA GROUP REFLECTIONS ON PRESIDENT ASSAD AND SYRIAN SOCIETY AFTER DAMASCUS VISIT

REF: FEB. 18 SMITH - DEUTSCH E-MAIL

1. (SBU) Summary: A delegation of Marmara Group (Strategic and Social Research Foundation, founded in 1985) members visiting Damascus February 20-24 was impressed with President Assad's stated interest in promoting positive relations with Turkey and the U.S., but sensed the Syrian bureaucracy was resistant. Briefing CG Arnett March 4 on the delegation's visit to Damascus on Feb. 20-24, Foundation President Suver said President Assad flatly denied responsibility for the Hariri assassination and rejected labelling Syria as a terrorist state. In contrast to Assad's apparent openness to the West, Suver noted that the Syrian bureaucracy resembled that of a former Iron Curtain country. The Turkish delegation was also struck by the relatively undeveloped infrastructure, contrasted with the seemingly advanced social climate, including young single Syrian women smoking water pipes and drinking wine in public, coed cafes. End summary.

2. (SBU) Dr. Akkan Suver, President of the Marmara Foundation, accompanied by Foundation member Ogan Soysal, briefed CG Arnett March 4 on the February 20-24 trip to Damascus of a Marmara Foundation delegation, ostensibly to participate in a university conference. The group included four MPs: AKP MPs Yuksek Cavusoglu (head of the parliamentary friendship group), Sait Acba, and Hikmet Ozdemir, and CHP MP Abdulaziz Yazar; Bilgi University Professor Ilter Turan; former MP and Higher Education Minister Ambassador Ertugrul Kuyumcuoglu; Sabah correspondent Yavuz Durat; and Yeditepe University professor Nedret Kuran Burcoglu. The Syrian Consul General in Turkey had organized the trip. Prior to their trip on February 18, CG had briefed delegation participants on issues relating to Syria, emphasizing U.S. concerns regarding Syria's support for terrorism, failure to control the border with Iraq, and Lebanon. Suver confirmed to the CG March 4 that the delegation had pursued all three issues during their visit and their meeting with President Assad.

3. (SBU) Suver described at length the group's meeting with President Assad, who spent an hour and a half with the delegation. Marmara Group characterized Assad as tense, given recent events in Lebanon, yet open to discussion with the group and to relations with the West. Suver called Assad a young and open man, who wants to open a new window in international relations. According to Suver, President Assad told a joke about a "genie," who declared in the punchline that it would be easier to build a solid bridge between Washington and Damascus than to reform the Syrian bureaucracy. The Marmara Foundation delegation had the impression that Syria was under the old Iron Curtain.

4. (SBU) Assad flatly denied that Syria was responsible for Hariri's assassination -- just as he rejected the accusation that Syria is a terrorist state. The delegation commented to Assad that democracy is a good thing -- but there is a cost for it. If Syria were truly ready for democracy, was he ready to get out of Lebanon?

5. (SBU) Assad said directly that Syria wants to expand its relations with Turkey -- a directness, Suver opined, indicating that Assad may have felt guilty about the recent events in Lebanon. Suver noted that while professing to pull troops back in accordance with international democratic practices, the Syrians' visa regulations, for example, perpetuate a lack of intention to make peace with neighbors (viz. the practice of confiscating passports of Syrians with Israeli visas). Suver emphasized to Assad the importance of maintaining communication with nations with which a country has not had diplomatic relations; for example, Turkey still is in active communication with Armenian officials, via the lobbying office in Washington. According to Suver, Assad listened. Assad was also concerned about PKK threats to Syrian diplomats serving in Turkey.

6. (SBU) The delegation's tour of Damascus included a new suburb, similar to Oran in Ankara, and a visit to the Syriac Patriarch Yusuf Ater in his new residence. Nearly adjacent to the modern five-star hotel in the heart of Damascus where the delegation stayed was a makeshift military camp built of tin structures^{3w} that the delegation assumed with surprise to be the site of a terrorist training camp, given the civilian Arab garb of the gun-toting occupants.

Suver commented that much of the city seemed a bit shabby, similar to Turkey in the 1950's. In contrast, the delegation found the social climate surprisingly advanced, observing Syrian girls as young as 15 drinking wine and smoking water pipes in cafes with men. In addition, the delegation also learned that it was also acceptable for single Syrian women to invite men to their homes alone.

17. (SBU) Suver noted that the Marmara Foundation had received a similar invitation to attend an academic conference in Tehran, and that he would call on the Consul General in advance to discuss U.S. policy views on Iran.

18. (SBU) Comment: The Marmara Foundation delegation was clearly struck by President Assad's openness, but detected that his personalized and flattering reception of the group may have been intended to hide his guilt about the recent events in Lebanon and support for terrorist groups. Their sense of the contradictions within Asad were mirrored by the striking contrast they saw between the 50's era infrastructure and the apparently liberal social mores. End Comment.

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